

TANF Average Length of Stay

Our best estimate of an average length of stay for case heads on TANF is about 41 months, with a median of 25 months.

Calculating an average length of stay on TANF involves combining two different populations: the majority of clients, who stay on TANF for a relatively short period, and a minority of clients who receive TANF for a much longer time. According to the authors of a pivotal study of welfare dynamics, “[t]he vast majority of people starting welfare at a point in time and the vast majority of people who ever have spells on welfare stay only a short time. Yet the majority of welfare recipients at a point in time are in the midst of a much longer spell, and most welfare funds are spent on them.”¹

Put another way, answering the question “What is the average length of stay on TANF?” requires first answering the question “For who?”

- For clients starting a spell on TANF (a cohort perspective), the average length of stay is 22 months (with a median of 15 months).
- For all clients on TANF in a particular month (a “snapshot” perspective), the average length of stay is 49 months (with a median of 34 months).
- For all clients on TANF in a particular year, the average length of stay is 41 months (with a median of 25 months).

We prefer the last estimate above because it combines the cohort and snapshot perspectives and therefore may better represent the full population of TANF clients. Each of the estimates above provides a valid answer to the length of stay question, but each answers the question for a different population of TANF clients.

Table 1 summarizes the estimates.

Table 1
Estimates of Average Length of Stay (LOS) for Virginia TANF Clients

Population	Mean LOS	Median LOS
Monthly “snapshot”	49	34
Entry cohort	22	15
Combined, 12 month population	41	25

Source: ADAPT Monthly Extract Files 2000-2009 Calendar Years

¹ Bane, Mary Jo and Ellwood, David T. *Welfare Realities: From Rhetoric to Reform*. Harvard University Press, 1996.

Table 2 shows the same estimates by program category. These statistics indicate that clients in the TANF Unemployed Parent (TANF-UP) program tend to have fewer total months in the program than other TANF clients.

Table 2
Estimates of Average Length of Stay (LOS) for Virginia TANF Clients
by Program Category

Program	Mean LOS	Median LOS
TANF		
Monthly "snapshot"	51	34
Entry cohort	22	15
Combined, 12 month population	42	25
TANF-UP		
Monthly "snapshot"	26	18
Entry cohort	17	10
Combined, 12 month population	25	15

Source: ADAPT Monthly Extract Files 2000-2009 Calendar Years

Notes: TANF category includes child-only cases. Program category is determined from earliest head of household record.

Details on the Calculations

The estimates are based on more than nine years of monthly TANF extracts from ADAPT, from January 2000 through December 2009, which we combined into a single file. We kept only case heads (“01” household members), and counted every month that a case head was in the file as a month of TANF receipt, although clients may not have received a payment in every one of those months. We calculated time on TANF for each client as the sum of all months of receipt, for all spells combined. In other words, the average length of stay is the average *total time* an individual receives TANF benefits and not the average length of each spell on TANF. For the estimates by program category, we used the category from the earliest head of household record.

For the “cohort” estimate, we identified all case heads who began a spell on TANF in any month between February 2000 and December 2000, and counted the total number of months of TANF receipt from that month through December 2009.² That cohort of new entrants averaged 22 months on TANF. This population under represents the minority of long-term recipients.

For the “snapshot” estimate, we identified all case heads on TANF in December 2009 (the most recent month of data), then counted total months of TANF receipt back to January 2000. We then doubled the number of months, on the assumption that individuals receiving TANF in a particular month are, on average, in the middle of their total time on TANF. The snapshot population averaged 49 months on TANF.³ This population under represents the majority of short-term recipients.

For the combined estimate, we identified all case heads who received TANF during 2000, then counted total months of receipt through December 2009. For clients active on TANF in January 2000, we doubled the total months of receipt, again on the assumption that these individuals were in the middle of their total time on TANF.⁴ We then calculated total length of stay for the entire 2000 population, combining the January 2000 snapshot with the February through December 2000 cohort. The combined population averaged 41 months of receipt.

Exhibits 1 and 2 provide information about exits from the TANF program. The first graph shows when a client is likely to leave the program. For both programs, clients begin to exit just before one year of participation, and exits for both groups peak between 1 and 2 years of participation. The probability of exit for TANF-UP participants then decreases until it peaks again at 5 years (the federal participation time limit). In contrast,

² We excluded the first month of data (January 2000) from the cohort because we do not know which clients began receiving TANF in January 2000 and which began in an earlier month.

³ This estimate may overstate time on TANF because some clients will be subject to the 60-month federal maximum and other clients will become ineligible when their youngest child turns 18, so doubling the current spell may not be appropriate for all clients.

⁴ The January 2000 snapshot averaged 54 months of receipt (median=36 months), fairly close to the estimate for the April 2009 snapshot, an indication that policy and demographic changes between 2000 and 2009 may not have substantially affected length of stay.

the single-parent TANF participants' likelihood of exit increases only slightly between 2 and 4 years and then sharply increases between 4 and 5 years of participation.

Exhibit 2 shows the distribution of total time spent on TANF. Consistent with the table above, most clients spend 15 months or less on TANF, although about one-fourth of all clients receive TANF for more than 2 ½ years. A very small percentage of clients spend more than 5 years on TANF. The graph also shows that TANF-UP clients left the program faster than single parent TANF clients. After two years 75 percent of TANF-UP clients had left the program, compared to about 60 percent of single parent TANF clients.

Exhibit 1: Probability of Leaving TANF at Each Time Period

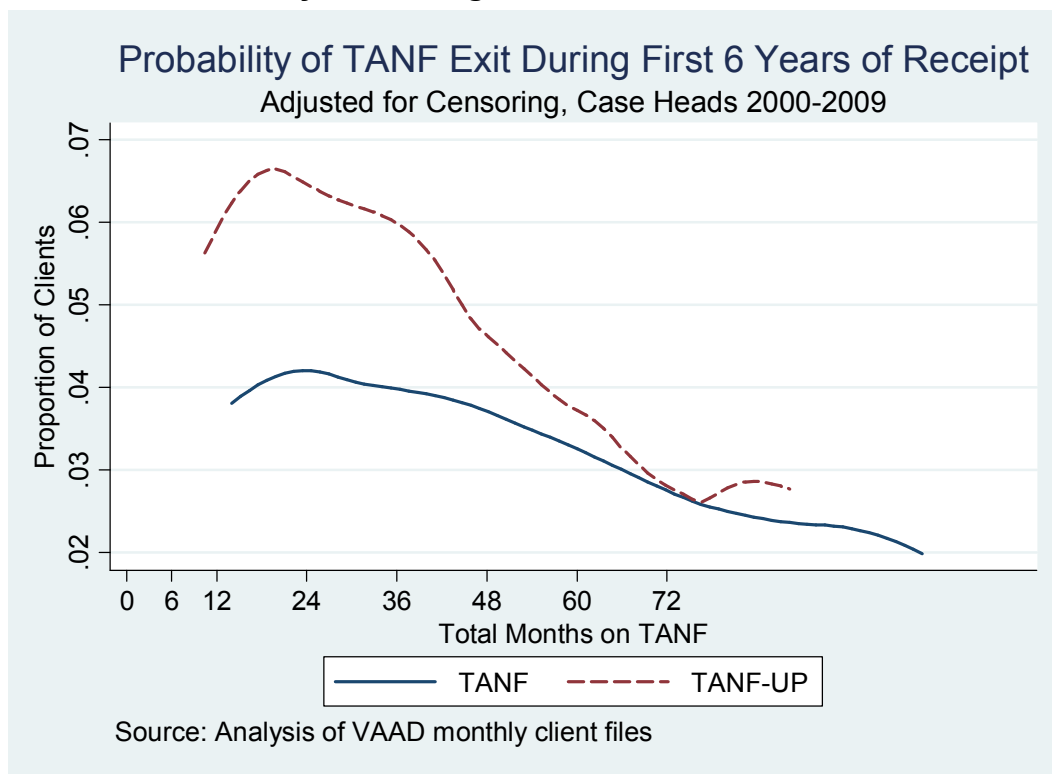


Exhibit 2: Cumulative Months on TANF, by Program Category

